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Book Review

Sufism: Veil and Quintessence, by Frithjof Schuon

Translated by William Stoddart
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The preface opens with an explanation of the title: the "Veil" is the opaqueness which is given off by pious extravagances of expression; and the first chapter, "Ellipsis and Hyperbole in Arab Rhetoric", puts before us many examples of those kinds of incoherence which all too often obscure Sufism's quintessence. One of the most striking — and fascinating — features of the earlier parts of this book is the profound and subtle analysis of the type of soul which tends to generate the veils, and of the complementary type which reacts against them. Schuon's understanding of racial differences has been displayed in his *Castes and Races*.[1] But in this new book he concentrates on one race alone, dwelling on the differences between its two main branches.

Although it could be said that every esoterism in the full sense of the word is universal, there are nonetheless affinities to be considered. Sufism, as the last esoterism of this cycle of time, cannot fail to have a certain temporal affinity with men of today. But there is also a racial factor to be considered, for although Sufism has become widely operative amongst yellow and black race communities, it cannot be said to owe them any of its basic characteristics. Paradoxically this does not prevent it from being in fact more easily accessible to some sectors of these races than it is to the modern Westerner. But that has nothing to do with racial affinity; it is merely that

[1] Perennial Books, 1982.

the communities in question are less firmly rooted in the totally profane and therefore anti-esoteric civilization which dominates the West. The fact remains that Sufism is an esoterism of the white race, if it be permissible to say such a thing; and herein lies one of the reasons why this book is of vital importance; for although the double claim of Sufism is bound, in the nature of things, to remain entirely virtual for the vast majority of Westerners now living, it is urgent that all outward and as it were accidental barriers between it and the West should be eliminated. Because of these "veils" — a man might say "Sufism is not for me", when it might be the very thing he needed most of all.

Europeans and their offshoots in other parts of the world have long been aware of two hereditary strains within them. Matthew Arnold, for example, was acutely conscious of two influences, complementary or conflicting, in English literature, and he termed them Hebraism and Hellenism. Schuon takes us more vastly and profoundly into this consciousness, and he needs for his purpose the wider terms of Semitism and Aryanism. The following passage makes us aware, from the start, of the complexity in question: "Psychologically, there are 'introverted' and contemplative Aryans, the Hindus, and 'extroverted' and enterprising Aryans, the Europeans; East and West, with the obvious reservation that the characteristics of the one are also to be found in the other. In the case of the Semites, who on the whole are more contemplative than Europeans and less contemplative than Hindus, there are also two principal groups, Jews and Arabs: the soul of the former is richer but more turned in on itself, while that of the latter is poorer but more expansive, more gifted from the point of view of radiance and universality." The author adds, by way of a note: "In this comparison we are thinking of orthodox Jews — those who have remained Orientals even in the West — and not of the totally Europeanised Jews, who combine certain Semitic characteristics with Western extroversion."

Further light is thrown on the different types two paragraphs later: "*Grosso modo*, the Aryans — except in cases of intellectual obscuration in which they have only retained their mythology and ritualism — are above all metaphysicians and therefore logicians, whereas the Semites — if they have not become idolators and magicians — are *a priori* mystics and moralists; each of the two mentalities or capacities repeating itself within the framework of the other, in conformity with the Taoist symbol of the *yin–yang*. Or again, the Aryans are objectivists, for good or for ill, while the Semites are subjectivists; deviated objectivism gives rise to rationalism and scientism, whereas abusive subjectivism engenders all the illogicalities and all the pious absurdities of which sentimental fideism — overzealous and conventional — is capable." Let us quote also a passage which shows as clearly as possible how far the scope of this book extends beyond the domain of the Hebraism–Hellenism contrast which we have, as it were, in our blood: "The encounter of Hinduism and Islam on the soil of India has something profoundly symbolic and providential about it, given that Hinduism is the most ancient integral tradition and that Islam on the contrary is the youngest religion; it is the junction of the primordial with the terminal. But there is here more than a symbol; this encounter means in fact that each of these traditions, which are nevertheless as different as possible, has something to

learn from the other, not of course from the point of view of dogmas ad practices, but from that of tendencies and attitudes; Islam offers its geometric simplicity, its clarity and also its compassion, while Hinduism brings its influence to bear by its profound serenity and by its multiform and inexhaustible universality."

It will no doubt have been understood from what has already been said that the veils which are this book's preliminary theme may be said to result from the Semitic origins of Sufism, while Western reactions against them spring from our Aryan heredity. The reactions are no doubt all the stronger in that many of those Western readers who turn their attention to Sufism do so because they hope to find in it something they have failed to find in Christianity. The consciousness of this failure means that they have largely thrown off the Hebraism that the Bible had superposed upon their Aryan roots. Their standpoint will therefore tend to be that of un-Semiticized Aryans.

Several aspects of veiling are treated here, with a wealth of illustration. The author speaks of his "twofold obligation to criticize and to justify." Without minimizing faults he explains how the fault in question comes to exist and what positive qualities lie at its roots. Also to be considered are differences of approach which call for no criticism provided that they are innocent of intolerance and of exaggeration, but which nonetheless need to be explained. The following masterly paragraph touches on points of the greatest practical importance and is instructive, in different ways, for both the Semite and the Aryan.

"A Westerner desirous of following an esoteric way would find it logical first of all to inform himself of the doctrine, then to enquire about the method and finally about its general conditions; but the Moslem of esoteric inclination — and the attitude of the Kabbalist is doubtless analogous — has definitely the opposite tendency: if one speaks to him of metaphysics, he will find it natural to reply that one must begin at the beginning, namely with pious exercises and all sorts of religious observances; metaphysics will be for later. He does not seem to realize that in the eyes of the Westerner, as also of the Hindu, this is to deprive the pious practices of their very point — not in themselves of course, but with a view to knowledge — and to make the way almost unintelligible; and above all, the Semitic zealot does not see that understanding of doctrine cannot result from a moral and individualistic zeal, but that on the contrary it is there to inaugurate a new dimension and to explain its nature and purpose. We may add that the moralistic attitude is only blameworthy through its ignorance of the opposite point of view or through its exaggeration, for in fact the doctrine deserves on our part an element of reverential fear; even our own spirit does not belong to us, and we only have full access to it to the extent that we know this. If it is true that the doctrine explains the meaning of devotion, it is equally true that devotion has a certain right to usher in the doctrine, and that the doctrine deserves this."

We have already referred to Schuon's *Castes and Races* in connection with questions of racial affinity. There are likewise some remarkable reflections on caste which come as a

supplement to the section on caste in that earlier masterpiece, and which are of particular interest. Mention must also be made of a chapter on philosophy where, with pertinent examples, the author shows that in their disagreements with the philosophers the Sufis have not always had the right on their side. Let us quote what he says about the philosophers' claim that the world is eternal, and his re-formulation or correction of the over simplified Sufi rejection of this: "The world is both eternal and temporal: eternal as a series of creations or a creative rhythm, and temporal by the fact that each link in this flux has a beginning and an end. It is Universal Manifestation in itself that is co-eternal with God because it is a necessary expression of His eternal Nature — the sun being unable to abstain from shining — but eternity cannot be reduced to a given contingent phase of this divine Manifestation. Manifestation is 'co-eternal', that is: not eternal, as only the Essence is; and this is why it is periodically interrupted and totally re-absorbed into the Principle, so that it is both existent and inexistent, and does not enjoy a plenary and so to speak 'continuous' reality like the Eternal itself."

Let us also quote the following: "In a certain respect, the difference between philosophy, theology and gnosis is total; in another respect, it is relative. It is total when one understands by 'philosophy' only rationalism; by 'theology', only the explanation of religious teachings; and by 'gnosis', only intuitive and intellective, and thus supra-rational, knowledge; but the difference is only relative when one understands by 'philosophy' the fact of thinking, by 'theology' the fact of speaking dogmatically of God and religious things, and by 'gnosis' the fact of presenting pure metaphysics, for then the *genres* interpenetrate. It is impossible to deny that the most illustrious Sufis, while being 'gnostics' by definition, were at the same time to some extent theologians and to some extent philosophers, or that the great theologians were to some extent philosophers and to some extent gnostics, the last word having to be understood in its proper and non-sectarian meaning."

The ground has now been cleared for what is the climax of the book, a chapter entitled "The Quintessential Esoterism of Islam." Although very concentrated, it is less long than one might have expected, but this accords with the nature of the quintessence which is its theme. As the author remarks: "To describe known or what one may call literary Sufism in all its *de facto* complexity and all its paradoxes would require a whole book, whereas to give an account of the necessary and therefore concise character of Sufism, a few pages can suffice."

The contents of this overwhelming chapter may surprise some readers owing to widespread fallacies about the true nature of esoterism. Other readers on the contrary will have been well prepared by the author's *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (reviewed at some length in the last number of this journal), in which he states categorically: "The profoundest truths are already given in the fundamental and initial formulations of the religions. Esoterism, in fact, is not an unpredictable doctrine that can only be discovered, should the occasion arise, by means of detailed researches; what is mysterious in esoterism is its dimension of depth, its particular developments and its practical consequences, but not its starting points, which coincide with the basic symbols of the religion in question."

It is therefore not surprising that the chapter should open with a reference to the three basic divisions of Islam: “The Islamic religion is divided into three parts: *Imân,* Faith, which contains everything one must believe; *Islâm,* the Law, which contains everything one must do; *Ihsân,* operative virtue, which confers upon believing and doing the qualities that make them perfect or, in other words, that intensify or deepen both faith and works. *Ihsân,* in short, is the sincerity of the intelligence and the will: it is our total adhesion to the Truth and our total conformity to the Law, which means that we must, on the one hand, know the Truth entirely, not in part only, and on the other hand conform to it with our deepest being and not only with a partial and superficial will. Thus *Ihsân* opens out onto esoterism — which is the science of the essential and the total — and is even identical with it; for to be sincere is to draw from the Truth the maximal consequences from the point of view of both the intelligence and the will; in other words, it is to think and to will with the heart, and thus with our whole being, with all that we are.”

This passage gives the key to the understanding of the whole, for it shows that Sufism, far from being other than Islam, is in fact total or absolute Islam as opposed to the fragmentary or relative Islam of exoterism. We are thus prepared in advance to read: “The two-fold Testimony is the first and the most important of the five “Pillars of the Religion” (*arkân ad-Dîn*). The others only have meaning in reference to it, and they are the following: Canonical Prayer (*Salâh*); the Fast of Ramadan (*Siyâm*)*;* Almsgiving (*Zakâh*)*;* Pilgrimage (*Hajj*). The esoterism of these practices resides not only in their obvious initiatic symbolism,[2] it resides also in the fact that our practices are esoteric to the extent that we ourselves are esoteric, firstly by our understanding of the Doctrine and then by our assimilation of the Method; these two elements being contained, precisely, in the two-fold Testimony.”

Very important in this context, though it comes earlier in the chapter, is the mention of the term *tawhîd.* Grammatically the word is the verbal noun of the factative or causative form of the verb whose root letters, *waw, hâ, dâl*, have the basic significance of “one”. *Tawhîd* thus expresses the act of making one, or “oneing”. As used by the generality it means the act of affirming the Divine Oneness or, what amounts to the same, the act of uttering the Testimony *1a ilâha illa ’Llâh,* “there is no god but God”. But the exoteric conception of Oneness is incomplete, whereas the Sufis use *Tawhîd* in a total sense to include the subjective realization of Oneness with God as well as, objectively, the affirmation of Absolute Oneness, “there is no god but God” in the sense of its inescapable meaning “there is no reality but the Reality”, that is “there is no reality but God”. In other words, they “draw from the Truth (which the Testimony represents) the maximal consequences from the point of view of both the intelligence (which is objective) and the will (which is subjective)”. Intellectually these consequences could be summed up in the argument that since our being, as we are certain, is not pure illusion, its reality must be included in the One Reality. As regards the will, it is a question of realizing or of making good this includedness. All esoterism lies in these supreme consequences with which the Absolute

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[2] The author duly expounds the symbolism of each Pillar, as the reader will find to his satisfaction.

Oneness of God is mysteriously pregnant. Elsewhere, in a Buddhist context, the author has said: “Spiritual realization exists ‘prior to’ man, and therefore man, who possesses no more reality of his own than foam possesses in relation to water, falls back into his own pre-existing Nirvana.”[3] He adds an explanatory reference to what he terms “the all-overriding principle of ‘non-duality’.” It is precisely in view of this principle that the Sufis say: “*Tawhîd* is one” (*at-Tawhîd wâhid*), which could be rendered: “There is only one Doctrine (and Way) of Oneness.” By way of paraphrase, in the light of the Buddhist parallel just given — and other analogous examples could be drawn from all the great traditions — whether one says: “May all beings have Happiness” or “There is no god but God”, *Tawhîd is* one. Having quoted the last three words, the author says: “This classic formula proclaims, in its own concise way, the essentiality, primordiality and universality of Islamic esoterism as well as of esoterism as such; and we might even say that all wisdom or gnosis — all the *Advaita-Vedânta*, if one prefers — is for Islam contained within the Shahâdah alone, the two-fold Testimony of Faith”.

If the first Testimony, *1a ilâha illa ’Llâh,* not only affirms the transcendence of the One but also implies the reintegration of the multiple into the One, the second Testimony, *Muhammadun Rasûlu Llâh,* “Muhammad is the Messenger of God”, expressly and directly operates this reintegration, this “oneing”, this *Tawhîd.* In other words, it reintegrates the relative reality of man (*Muhammad*) into the Absolute reality of the One (Allâh). “The entire accent is put on the intermediate element, *Rasûl,* “Messenger”; it is this element, the Logos, that links the manifested Principle to the Principle in itself.… The word *Rasûl,* “Messenger”, indicates a ‘descent’ of God towards the world; it equally implies an ‘ascent’ of man towards God.” But the author leaves us in no doubt that the quintessential means of this reintegration is the invocation of the single name *Allâh* (*dhikr Allâh*).

This chapter is centered on Absolute Oneness. It is fittingly followed by a complementary final chapter which is centered, implicitly, on Absolute Plenitude. Explicitly, it is on the three dimensions of Oneness which are expressed by the words Absolute Infinite Perfection, and which esoterism can never lose sight of. We first know these dimensions in their reflections on the plane of our earthly experience — or rather we recognize them as evident when Schuon points them out to us. Here once again readers will be impressed by this author’s amazing originality, in virtue of which it is given to him to declare, at so late an hour in the history of mankind, fundamentally important truths for the first time (if not, where else have they been told?), truths moreover which are profoundly simple and also, when our attention is drawn to them, obvious.

“God is manifested in the world, as we have said, by the miracle of existence, the gulf between the least grain of dust and nothingness being absolute; He manifests His Infinity *a priori* by the cosmic container space–time, which has no imaginable limits, any more than do the multiplicity and diversity of its contents; and He manifests His Perfection by the qualities of

[3] *In the Tracks of Buddhism,* 157-8.

things and beings, which bear witness to their divine archetypes and thereby to the Divine Perfection.… On the one hand, space together with time, then the existence of things, and then their qualities, ‘prove’ God; on the other hand, they ‘are’ God, but seen through the veil of ‘Outwardness’ or of ‘Distance’.”

This chapter also confronts us with the same triad on higher planes and according to different spiritual Perspectives — Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian, as well as Islamic. “Moreover, and even above all, Infinitude — like Perfection — is an intrinsic characteristic of the Absolute: it is as it were its inward life, or its love which by overflowing, so to speak prolongs itself and creates the world.”